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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 000535

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SUBJECT: VENEZUELA POLITICAL UPDATE: 2/12/2004

REF: CARACAS 00503 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Charles S. Shapiro for Reasons 1.5(b) and (d)

SUMMARY:

1. CNE:

-- (C) OAS observers told poloff on February 11 that the National Electoral Council (CNE) will re-submit the remainder of the signature forms for the presidential recall referendum to a verification using their stricter criteria. This move will certainly slow the verification process and increase the number of signatures that could ultimately be stricken from the count.

-- (U) CNE Director Jorge Rodriguez announced February 12 the results of the signature drive would be known by the end of February.

-- (U) Pro-Chavez CNE Director Jorge Rodriguez alleged that opposition forces were pressuring the body to decide in their favor. Pro-opposition CNE Vice President Ezequiel Zamora said he would ask authorities to remove a pro-Chavez activists ("chavistas") camping on the sidewalk outside the CNE building.

2. Carter Center:

-- (U) Visiting Carter Center representative Jennifer McCoy met with CNE Director Jorge Rodriguez February 12. She announced that the Carter Center was concerned about public safety at the CNE building for the up-coming marches. The OAS and Carter Center will meet together with the CNE on February 13.

3. GoV:

-- (C) Acting ForMin Arevalo Mendez told the Ambassador on February 11 the opposition is trying to recreate the events of April 2002. However, Mendez said the "people" would not allow it this time.

-- (U) Minister of Infrastructure Diosdado Cabello said on February 11 the GoV would "defend democracy," denied that the GoV was planning an "autogolpe," and repeated that the GoV would abide by the decision of the CNE.

-- (U) MVR Deputy Dario Vivas announced on February 12 the GoV would begin Carnival celebrations one week at Plaza Venezuela, where the opposition had been planning to rally to distribute copies of the signatures to its marchers.

4. Opposition:

-- (C) Former Chavez advisor and current Chavez critic Luis Miquilena told the Ambassador said he believes the "fix is in" with the CNE, and the TSJ will back them up to stop the referendum.

-- (C) Rumors persist that elements on both sides are planning to stage violent attacks during the February 13 and 14 marches in an attempt to garner support.

End Summary.

Look Again: CNE To Re-hash Signatures
Using Tougher Standards

5. (C) OAS observers told poloff late on the evening of February 11 that, as expected, the CNE board will re-submit signature forms for the presidential recall referendum from 11 states to an additional verification process, using a new stricter criteria. OAS observers told poloff that during the inspection of the opposition's presidential recall signature

forms the criteria for verification were tightened (see reftel), dramatically increasing the rate at which signature forms were referred to the CNE's Superior Technical Committee (CTS) for additional review. The CNE's decision will ask workers to go back and look at all the forms previously reviewed to see if they meet the new higher standards.

16. (C) A total of 25 percent of the signature forms have been sent to the CTS for additional review so far. The CNE's decision to review all forms using the new tougher criteria could result in an additional 90,000 signature forms (or roughly 900,000 signatures) being referred to the CTS, thereby throwing as many as 50 percent of the signature forms into the pile to go through the heightened CTS scrutiny. This move will certainly slow the verification process and increase the number of signatures that could ultimately be stricken from the count.

CNE Promises Results by End of February

17. (U) CNE Director Jorge Rodriguez announced February 12 the results of the signature drive would be known by the end of February. The CNE also announced that on February 12 they would begin to discuss establishing criteria for the CTS committee, which has already begun meeting without any formal instructions. Visiting Carter Center representative Jennifer McCoy met with CNE Director Jorge Rodriguez February 12. She announced that the Carter Center was concerned about public safety at the CNE building for the up-coming marches. The OAS and Carter Center will meet together with the CNE on February 13.

CNE Chiefs Air Their Differences

18. (U) CNE Director Jorge Rodriguez, who was appointed by the pro-Chavez Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) party, made a statement February 11 to decry various unnamed "sectors" trying to hinder the CNE's work, alleging that opposition forces were pressuring the body to decide in their favor. Not to be outdone, CNE Vice President Ezequiel Zamora, appointed by the opposition, said he would ask authorities to remove a vocal group of pro-Chavez activists ("chavistas") camping on the sidewalk outside the CNE building. The chavistas, led by pro-Chavez activist Lina Ron, posed for cameras and made speeches on bullhorns outside the CNE February 12, vowing that they would remain at the CNE to confront opposition marches scheduled for February 13 and 14. Some wore Che Gueverra-style combat fatigues and berets. Nevertheless, Rodriguez announced February 12 that the results of the signature drive would be known by the end of February.

GoV Warns Opposition, Pledges to Follow CNE Decisions

19. (C) Acting Foreign Minister General Arevalo Mendez told the Ambassador on February 12 that the opposition is trying to recreate the events which lead to Chavez's temporary removal in April 2002. However, Mendez said the western neighborhoods of the capital will not march this time. Mendez said April 2002 was the only time in the country's history when Venezuelans took to the street to protest a coup d'etat. The difference between today and April 2002, said Mendez, is that today the "people are organized" and would prevent the opposition from attempting a coup to begin with.

110. (U) Diosdado Cabello, the GoV Minister of Infrastructure and a long-time Chavez hard-liner, joined in the public war of words on February 11 by saying that the GoV knew how far it was willing to go "to defend democracy" and Chavez's self-declared bolivarian revolution. Cabello denied that the GoV was planning an "autogolpe," or self-coup, to stop a recall referendum, and repeated that the GoV would abide by

the decision of the CNE.

111. (U) MVR Deputy Dario Vivas announced February 12 the GOV would begin Carnival celebrations one week early by having activities such as beauty contest preliminaries at Plaza Venezuela, where the opposition had been planning to rally to distribute copies of the signatures to its marchers.

Opposition Points to Sneaky Business in the CNE

112. (C) During a February 12 meeting with the Ambassador, former Chavez advisor and current Chavez critic Luis Miquilena said he is very worried about the CNE's handling of the presidential signature drive. Miquilena believes the "fix is in" with the CNE, and the TSJ will back them up to

stop the referendum. Miquilena also sees a potential for violence this weekend, which Chavez will use as a pretext to react strongly.

Conspiracy Theories Abound from Both Sides

13. (C) Rumors persist that elements on both sides are planning to stage violent attacks during the February 13 and 14 marches in an attempt to garner support. In one scenario, an opposition fringe group is rumored to be instructing demonstrators to bring guns to the February 14 march on the CNE to protect against expected attacks from pro-GoV activists ("chavistas"), or to invite violence against themselves in order to repeat the events of April 2002, when the military intervened and temporarily removed Chavez. Other opposition rumors suggest that chavistas are willing to shoot their own supporters and cleverly blame it on the opposition in order to trigger a popular pro-Chavez outcry.

14. (C) The GoV, for its part, is peddling its own conspiracy theories. During a February 12 meeting with poloff, ruling MVR deputy Calixto Ortega painted an elaborate picture in which he asserted anti-GoV activists plan to infiltrate Lina Ron's group and throw explosives at the CNE building on February 13 or 14. Ortega suggested this would provide cover for the opposition to enter the CNE, destroy evidence of their "mega-fraud," and let them blame the GoV. Ortega distanced himself from Lina Ron, asserting she was an uncontrollable extremist working on her own behalf. While Ortega said he was sure that authorities would cooperate to keep violence to a minimum, he admitted that the GoV timed its Youth Convention (see reftel) in order to have GoV supporters on hand in case things "get rough."
SHAPIRO

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